PITTA

Newsletter of the Birdwatchers' Society of Andhra Pradesh
New Series Volume 11 Number 1 January 2014

FIELD OUTINGS FOR JANUARY 2014: The field visits of this month will be focused on carrying out activities pertaining to the Asian Waterfowl Census (AWC). The following visits are planned:

4th January:	Ameenpur	18th January:	Himayat Sagar backwaters
5th January:	Osman Sagar backwaters	19th January:	Palmakole Tank
11th January:	Fox Sagar & Shamirpet backwaters	26th January:	Pocharam Lake

For further details and to co-ordinate, please contact Ms Surekha Aitabathula (99490-38532) or Ms Sharada Annamaraju (97032-00275).

FIELD OUTING: Sunday, 12th January 2014: Narsapur Reserve Forest. Meeting point: 6.30AM, Near Mangatrai Pearls.

Spanning an area of over 40 sq. km, the Narsapur Forest is well known for its bird life. The forest is rich in small woodland birds, woodpeckers and flycatchers. Brown Fish Owl, Indian Pitta, White-bellied Drongo etc are some of the interesting sightings during past visits. Narsapur Lake also has the potential of throwing up some surprises. This will be a half-day trip. For further details and to co-ordinate, please contact Ms. Surekha Aitabathula (99490-38532).

A Pulicat Diary
26th – 29th December 2013

Text and photos: Humayun Taher

DAY ONE - NELAPATTU

Every year, during the Christmas weekend, I make it a point to visit the Pulicat and Nelapattu Wildlife Sanctuaries. The prime reason, of course, is to destress myself. I call it my *detox* trip and, after a full year of work-related pressures and the other inseparable adjuncts of 'civilisation', such a detoxing session is a useful, even necessary tool for retaining such sanity as I can reasonably claim to possess.

This year being no different, it was a glad day when, my bags packed and my optics checked and present, I found myself aboard the train with Anand and Prasad for company, chugging along the old familiar track. The familiar stations whistled past, many of them now swollen to monstrous proportions, completely in contrast to the small tree-shaded platforms I remembered from my dim youth. This track has been well-travelled by me in my early days from frequent peregrinations to Chennai and back, and I retain more than a passing memory of the stations along the way. What used to be single tree-shaded platforms have now become some sort of industrial goods sheds, complete with monster cranes and large buildings crammed to bursting with officials and their paraphernalia. Life was much simpler in the earlier days, I'm thinking.

Early morning found us detraining at the destination. Here again, times have changed and civilisation seems to have caught up. I was disappointed to see this but the plus side of this was that it was now easy to get a cup of tea without waiting for the stalls to open. Fortifying ourselves with a cup of the soothing oolong, we opened negotiations with the ubiquitous auto-wallahs to waft us from the station to the lodge where, we were hoping, our booking had been done and the staff awaited our arrival with the red carpet and other accoutrements of welcome. The auto-wallahs struck a hard bargain and, to make matters worse, the lodge didn't come through with the red or any other colour of carpet. However, they did admit that our booking was valid and reluctantly allowed us to take possession of the promised room. Having washed the grime and sleepiness out of our system, we descended to a nearby hostelry for a very toothsome breakfast and then found a very enthusiastic auto-wallah who agreed to transport us the twenty-something kilometres to the Nelapattu Wildlife Sanctuary, which I must admit he did in great style and in almost record time.

Now, before leaving Hyderabad, we had established communications with the Forest Department officials and informed them of our good intentions to visit the place. We had particularly laid stress on the fact that our arrival would be during hours when most of humankind is in deep slumber. So it was a bit of a surprise to see that, despite our requests, the official guarding the entrance to the sanctuary and responsible for issuing the admission tickets was nowhere to be seen. However, the sanctuary gate was open, which was something gained, so in we went. We discovered the official near the sanctuary office and, having introduced ourselves and our honourable intentions (which I may mention caused that worthy to look completely nonplussed: I could sympathise with him, of course: who comes all the way from Hyderabad just to watch birds!?), and we entered the main sanctuary area, walking along the path leading over the bund of the Nelapattu Tank.

Nelapattu is one of the finest of the South Indian Pelicanries. The tank itself is small; less than a couple of square kilometres in area. What makes it unique is the large number of *Barringtonia acutangula* trees growing in the tank. These trees are unique in that they thrive best inside water. The large bushy tops protrude above the surface of the water like small islands and here the Pelicans and Storks, Cormorants and Herons can build their nests in perfect safety from intruders. Or so we thought; though now I am not so sure!

This year, what caught our eyes first of all was a group of nesting Spoonbills. Now, Spoonbills are known to nest in Nelapattu, but this was the first time in several years that I have actually seen them engaged in procreation. So I was naturally charmed to see their somewhat acrimonious nest-building activities and the birds themselves, resplendent in full breeding regalia, were wondrously picturesque and fascinating. Nature certainly knows how to put on a show – in this case with yellow plumes, red and yellow throat and pure white plumage, guaranteed to make any detergent manufacturer weep with joy.

Eurasian Spoonbill

We spent a long time exclaiming over the activities of these strange birds with their spoon-shaped beaks, their loud ringing calls sounding clearly to us as they constantly came almost to blows over the selection of some choice twig which two birds were equally insistent that each wanted as the star decor of their own individual nest. Having gazed long at these birds we continued along our way; our present objective being the watch tower built halfway along the tank bund, from which we could get a very good view of the entire lake and the nesting birds.

Asian Openbill Storks and Spot-billed Pelicans are the main nesters at this Pelicanry. But there are other birds also here. Little Cormorants and Indian Shags were also nesting, as were Oriental White Ibis.

Oriental White Ibis

Several Ibis nests had small chicks and we were moved to see one bird carefully feeding its tiny offspring who opened wide their gaping maws and wheezed asthmatically as the food was pushed down their little pink throats. It seemed impossible for the birds to feed their young without a grave danger of skewering them through but happily the birds are much more expert at the feeding than we gave them credit for and not a drop of blood was spilled, except that of the unfortunate fish or crab that the birds caught.

Spot-billed Pelican

There were very few Pelican chicks at this time of the year, only about three or four pairs had chicks in the nest. But many were incubating so it is possible that a couple more weeks will see the birds with most of the eggs hatched. On the other hand, the Openbills had obviously commenced much earlier; many nests had chicks and I even saw some half-grown birds clinging precariously to the edge of their by-now-far-too-small nest, only preventing themselves from falling by vigorous flapping of their wings.

Having settled ourselves on the top floor of the two-storey watch tower, I unfolded the tripod and mounted the scope on; then took out my field notebook and was soon scribbling away, noting down behaviours, numbers and interesting observations. Engrossed in these activities, I quickly became the centre of attention to the visitors that now start to invade the sanctuary. Many of these good people were convinced I am some sort of being from another planet. I can hear many most flattering, interesting and some quite outrageous theories being propounded. Both Prasad and Anand were getting tired of having to constantly explain that I had nothing to do with Animal Planet, National Geographic, Mars or Venus! I think in many cases, they were only partially successful. I realised that we were probably more interesting to these visitors than the birds they had actually come to see and, in fact, after some time, our visitors gave up any pretence of watching the birds and concentrated all their attentions on the three of us. We were not unduly disturbed, as these activities were not as irksome as they sound, and I think at least one little lad was thrilled to bits at being allowed to peer through the scope at the birds. I wager he will be telling this tale for many a moon to come!

And then suddenly there was an explosion in the heronry. A large number of birds flew up into the air, squawking in alarm and the normal noise and confusion that is so much a feature of many South-Indian heronries doubled and trebled in pitch and volume. All three of us immediately started to look up into the skies, for such a disturbance most likely is caused by a cruising Marsh Harrier, Greater Spotted Eagle or other predator. But the skies only held the still-squawking birds that were circling around, freely cursing whatever predator had alarmed them.

Just as we were thinking it was a false alarm, we saw them! A trio of Bonnet Macaques had somehow managed to get onto one of the nesting trees, and were having the time of their lives. Two full-grown animals, accompanied by a sub-adult were moving around among the nests, grabbing here an egg, there a chick and generally indulging in an orgy of colossal proportions. I saw at least two Openbill chicks being grabbed and one Night Heron nest containing eggs being pounced upon by the sub-adult animal, who proceeded to first devour the eggs and then added insult to injury by thoughtfully pulling the nest to bits and dropping it into the water. A Pelican nest on this tree seemed to be another attraction but the Pelican, spreading its wings and opening wide its huge bill, seems to strike the monkeys as a dangerous customer against whom it would perhaps be unwise to try conclusions. Forbearing to disturb this large bird, the trio moved on to the next tree where we could no longer see them.

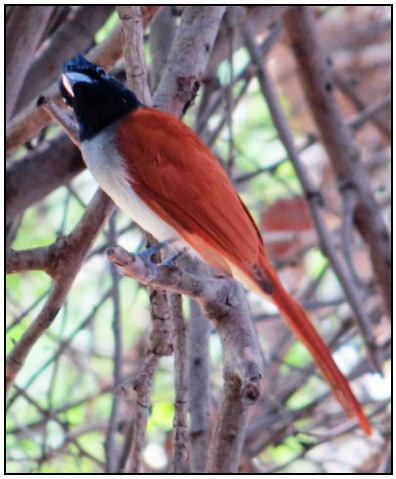
Spot-billed Pelican and Bonnet Macaque

Now this shows two things. The first is that there is obviously some way from the shore to the nest trees within the lake, which the monkeys have found and which they are exploiting. The second is that this activity seems to be limited to very few animals. As I say, we only saw three distinct individual Macaques robbing the nests so it seems likely that only a very few animals are privy to this method and the route to the nest trees. At the same time, I don't think we should be too critical of this as it is yet another method of natural selection and will not, unless too widespread, make too much of a dent in the population of the nesting birds. But what the local Forest Department staff have to watch out for is to see that the habit does not become widespread and more and more monkeys join in. If that happens, it will definitely be detrimental to the breeding success of the birds in the heronry. Some judicious pruning of the trees seems to be indicated to prevent the monkeys from gaining the nesting trees. Although good swimmers, monkeys hate the water and will refuse to swim unless absolutely compelled to and even then only in extreme circumstances. So I don't see them swimming out to the nests, even with the temptation of easy meals of chicks and eggs. Take away their arboreal highway then, and the nests should be relatively safe from their depredations. Perhaps a word in season to the right authorities is indicated.

White-eyed Buzzard

And so, what with the monkeys and the nesting birds, it had been a most interesting day. Our way out of the sanctuary led past a series of telegraph poles that are the ancestral home of the resident White-eyed Buzzard and we were not surprised to see it perched on one of the poles and surveying us with grave suspicion. We were able to get some long-range photographs of the shy creature and then left it to its own devices, fortified ourselves with a good lunch, eaten under the shade of a small tree on the roadside and then, much refreshed, we strolled down to the road and so back to the lodge. On the morrow, we planned to visit the Pulicat Wildlife Sanctuary and see what was to be had there.

But that, of course, is another story!



Asian Paradise-flycatcher

DAY TWO – ISLAND-HOPPING

Having spent the first day in the lap of nature at the Nelapattu Wildlife Sanctuary, we were now pardonably anxious to see what Pulicat has to offer. After all, numbers of nesting waterbirds is all very well, but one of the main purposes here was to see what was available in the nature of wintering waterfowl. Where are the migrants, I heard Anand and Prasad say. And though I did not say it, I thought the same…

Close to the Tamil Nadu state border, a little fishing village nestles on the shores of the huge 450 square kilometre Pulicat lagoon; the second-largest brackish water lake in the country. A conveniently placed water-channel is the parking spot for a motorised boat belonging to the forestry authorities. Having obtained necessary permissions to use the services of this most worthy boat and its equally worthy operators, we rendezvoused with them on the shores of this water-channel and found the team busy tinkering with the engine and coaxing it to action. The engine appeared to think this a not very good idea at all and obstinately refused to co-operate. So the three of us started to potter around and see what was to be seen while the engine was being fixed.

Little Ringed Plover (juvenile)

A small group of Rosy Starlings were the first notable sightings, much to Prasad's delight. He was captivated by them and went off to see how close he could get. Anand and I meantime were more interested in a small Plover running around in front of us. Somehow, it didn't look quite like a Little Ringed, but then it didn't look like a Kentish either. We all peered at it from various angles and finally, referring to the books, we were able to identify it as a Little Ringed. Not a migrant, but a wader none the less.

Eurasian Curlew

As if to reinforce that waders were to the fore here, we saw a magnificent Eurasian Curlew stalking importantly along, periodically throwing back its head and sounding forth its loud and weird call. A few Sandpipers and a solitary Ruff didn't seem to mind this cacophony and wagged their tails in approval. Prasad reappeared with the news that there were a pair of Hoopoe somewhere about. He proudly displayed the exposures he had made of this pair and certainly the salmon-pink birds contrasted very beautifully against the emerald-green grass as they diligently probed the sandy ground in search of beetle grubs, ant-lion larvae and other succulent tidbits that would appeal to the gourmets of the *Upupa* family.

A loud roar from the vicinity of the water channel apprised us of the fact that the engine, vowing that it would ne'er consent had, in fact, finally consented to start. We speedily clambered on board before it could change its mind, the boatman engaged gears and we were off, slowly steaming into the open waters of the lagoon, chugging along towards where a tiny bead of land, looking lost and forlorn in the midst of the huge expanse of sky and water belied the fact that it was one of the larger islands hidden in the depths of the lagoon. There was every reason for us to feel most happy and content. The waters were cool, the weather was pleasant and the sun shined down out of a cloudless sky. And to reinforce the feeling of contentment, a small flock of Caspian Terns suddenly seemed to realise that the wake caused by the boat was a most capital spot to fish in. We were now in much deeper waters and perhaps for this reason, the little fish were disoriented by the propeller; and the terns found this fact much to their liking. Soon there was a large flock of close to 25 of these magnificent sea-travellers following close behind in our wake, frequently closing their long wings and plunging into the crystal-clear waters, to emerge a moment later with a small fish firmly held in their coral-red beaks. Anand was rapturous! He had been much exercised of late from a suspected flaw in his beloved lens, and last night he had managed to crack the case and banish the cause of the flaw! So now he was eager to make up for past opportunities lost and the terns were providing him with a heaven-sent chance. About 20 minutes of activity and he casually announced that he had already clicked about 100 pictures. Yikes! I wondered what he would have done in the old days of film cameras…

Caspian Tern

We were now getting close to the island that was our destination. A huge flock of ducks now suddenly materialised to our left side. At first, there was just a grey smudge on the waters, then there were a few tiny black specks and then suddenly there was a huge congregation of black spots, occasionally flashing white as the birds turned and caught the light of the sun on their white breasts and bellies. We strained our eyes and managed to make out a smattering of Gadwalls mixed with the much more numerous Pintails and Shovellers that comprised the bulk of the flock. The lake bottom rushed up to meet us as we approached the shores and, in this shallow area were Redshank, Godwits and a solitary Curlew. The odd Sandpiper and Plover were also present; but then we spotted the most beautiful of them all: a group of Pacific Golden Plovers. These most picturesque and colourful birds are large for Plovers and their delicate golden-flecked plumage is indescribably beautiful and picturesque. They made a nice picture as they sat in the bright green of the grass field that makes up the shores of a small fresh-water pond on this island. This fresh water pond had many interesting sights… a covey of Common Snipe zoom through the grass, occasionally causing me to jump in alarm as they purred out right under my feet. A pod of nine Grey-headed Lapwings was another very pleasant sight. These birds appear to be on the increase. We first saw them four years ago when there were four of them on this self-same island. Last year, Prasad and I saw two birds and this year there were nine. This argued that the birds were becoming regulars here and that is a good sign. They are most interesting birds and deserve whatever protection they can get as they are coming dangerously close to being elevated to that unflattering status of "Near Threatened"!

Grey-headed Lapwing

A tiny stream meanders its way down to the aforementioned fresh-water pond. On the shores of this little trickle, Prasad and I remembered that we saw the Little Green Heron last year. We found a convenient bush that cast a very pleasant shade (the sun was now getting slightly uncomfortable), and sprawled down in the welcome coolness, revelling in the calm and peaceful surroundings, while watching the birds going about their business. A Curlew stalked along just in front of us, reminding me ludicrously of an elderly colonel taking his evening constitutional. I have often wondered why it is that I am always reminded of a colonel when I see a Curlew. Maybe the long thin, curving beak has something to do with the matter, resembling as it does, the fierce waxed moustaches such as the colonels of the old school were said to wear. Fortunately the Curlew forbore to shatter the stillness with its strident calls, and for this we were all grateful as the silence was now very soothing indeed.

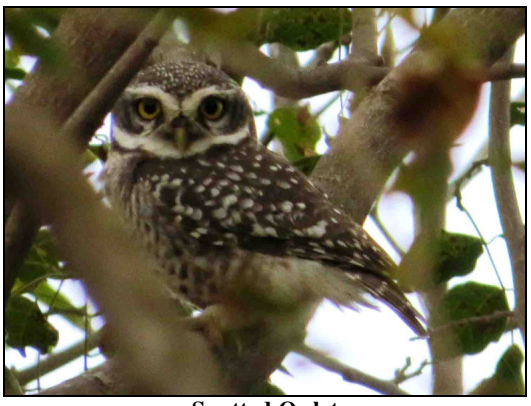
The shrill piping calls of Pied and Common Kingfishers seemed only to emphasize the stillness and silence of the place, and we drank in this solitude and peace. I think we should all fall silent more often. It is only thus that we can realise how insignificant we are in the face of primeval nature and how little we matter to the earth and her scheme of things.

Gull-billed Tern

The day was starting to really heat up and it was time to beat a retreat. We didn't particularly want to be fried so we hauled ourselves up and, not without considerable regret, returned to the boat. Along the way, a small grey tern sitting on a small stone in the water cocked its head and stared at us curiously. It was an interesting creature as it was a Gull-billed Tern, a bird that is not often seen in these waters: we clustered around with our cameras and the bird obliged by staying put and posing very nicely for us. Having recorded it for posterity, we continued on our way and were soon back in the boat, chugging along and flushing sundry waders and the odd flock of ducks out of the waters around us. Too soon, we were back out in the open waters and, right on cue, the Caspian Terns appeared again and fell into their old tried-and-tested routine, following close behind the boat and pouncing quickly on any little fish unwary enough to appear too close to the surface. So, contemplating the acrobatics and grace of these most magnificent birds and reflecting on the number of fish that they must be consuming daily and annually, we were soon back at the ancient jetty where the boat slid in, the engine shuddered to a halt and, in the sudden peaceful silence that enveloped us, a single White-breasted Kingfisher issued forth his chattering call, welcoming us back to the mainland!

The forest department staff were insistent that we accompany them to a nearby plantation where, they said, there were a few birds in residence that they had never seen before and were not sure what they were. From their initial descriptions, we were of opinion that the birds could be the Stone Curlews, but it was wise to be certain as the much rarer Great Stone Plover is also known to be seen occasionally in these parts. So, once we had landed and had polished off a most toothsome lunch, we accompanied the forest officers to the plantation. Tramping through the rows of saplings we soon put up a small covey of some eight Stone Curlews, which, the officials informed us, were the birds they were referring to. Identification was not difficult, but obtaining photographs was another matter altogether. These birds are far too retiring and shy to stay put and, at the first sight of humans, they scatter and disappear into the scrub where they are almost impossible to make out against the backdrop of dried leaves and tangle of shrubbery. Still, Anand managed to creep up sufficiently close to make a few exposures, detailed enough for the forest staff to puff acknowledgement and approbation.

Evening was drawing on now and, perhaps to reinforce this belief, a small phantom appeared in the trees. The little chap bowed down in surprise when it saw us staring at it. The dilapidated forest department building we were standing close to had a little wooden electrical circuit box shaped rather like a post-box and this, we were informed, contained the nest of the little Punchinello now glaring down at us out of golden-yellow eyes. Spotted Owlets are most delightful little creatures and always a pleasure to hob-nob with. I was not displeased at all to see this little fellow fly onto the grill encircling the verandah of the aforesaid dilapidated structure and, from thence, to fly onto the circuit box and disappear inside; vanishing as quickly and as silently as any phantom could do. And we blundering humans, far less quick and considerably less silent, emulated his excellent example and turned our steps homeward too. A most excellent day had ended quite well; and tomorrow would be yet another day!



Spotted Owlet

From the town of Sullurupeta to the hallowed gates of the ISRO, the road runs, straight as an arrow through the bowels of the great lagoon, the second-largest brackish water lake in the country. This road, pancake-flat for most of its 17 kilometre stretch, neatly bisects the water, creating large expanses of mud-flats on both sides, which are a haven for the wading birds that throng to the mighty lake. It is also the preferred habitat for the cyclamen-pink Greater Flamingos that annually visit the lagoon in vast numbers to feed on the rich plankton that is found in winter in the brine waters of the lake. But these are not the only birds that use this part of the lagoon. There are others, equally interesting…

Now, the best way of birding this stretch of road is by being mobile; because the birds are there, but they are scattered about all along the length, and it is a good idea to be provided with some form of artificial locomotion to enable us to do the entire stretch without having to walk. In previous trips, we had found that one of the best ways was to avail ourselves of a bicycle and so, well mounted, we could ride merrily along the road, stopping wherever we saw something interesting, standing there as long as required and then continuing along the way, perhaps whistling merrily as we pedalled along. So, when the day came when we decided it was time to 'do' this stretch, we sallied forth from our hotel in search of a cycle-shop. I remembered the previous year when we had rented bicycles and so, we went first to "Mastan Ali's cycle shop". Unfortunately, times have changed and Mr Mastan Ali no longer deals in hiring out of bicycles. We were informed that we could purchase the finest cycles that money can buy, but when it comes to hiring out, the bottom had dropped out of the market. A couple more cycle shops that we visited had much the same story to relate, and the upshot was that there were no cycles to be rented for love or money in Sullurupeta. So now what were we to do!?

Anand first proposed the idea that we use an auto-rickshaw for the purpose by contracting one for the full day. I was openly doubtful. I seemed to have set my heart on the bicycling and scoffed at the idea of autos, pointing out that it would be noisy, that being seated inside a rickshaw would probably prevent us from seeing some small birds that would have been more noticeable from the saddle, that the speed of the rickshaw would be counter-productive to birding, and so on and so forth.

However, when it was clear that no bicycles would be forthcoming, Prasad, a capital negotiator, opened negotiations with a charming young auto-wallah; giving him the low-down on what was expected of him (the auto-wallah) and stressing the importance of the mission, how these counts would reach international audiences, how the birds would benefit and, more to the point, how he (the auto-wallah) himself would benefit. From this point on, it became merely a question of 'how much'.

I could see that the auto-wallah was fascinated by the eccentricities of these people from the big cities. I mean, who comes all the way from the city just to ride around and watch birds and count them! And why should international organizations be bothered about how many birds were to be found here? I became convinced the fellow was just searching for a polite way of getting away from us, before we became violent and started to howl and bite, which was manifestly what we seemed to be capable of. However, the figure he finally mentioned, though a trifle on the high side, seemed reasonable enough if we were to have the benefit of his services for the entire day. Somewhat to his chagrin, we agreed to pay the sum if he would place himself completely at our disposal for the whole day. Avarice triumphed over caution and the auto-wallah agreed to be at the lodge at six the next morning and waft us wherever we want to go.

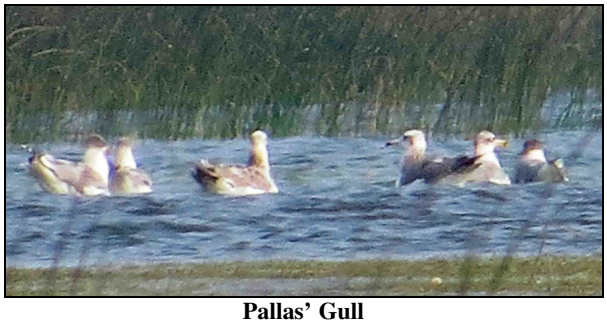
DAY THREE - PULICAT

I had to admit, the auto-wallah did a fine job of it. Of course, there was the momentary hitch such as time; one should not expect punctuality from auto-wallahs, of course. But I am bound to admit he only turned up some 20 minutes late and that time was soon made up. Having victualled ourselves at the local hostelry and restored humour with a cup of tea, we climbed into the auto, read the riot act to our driver and set off along the road.

For the first couple of kilometres, the road runs through the outskirts of town and then enters into an area of fields. Here, there were Openbills foraging in the fields for snails and clams. Egrets and Herons dotted the fields, stalking through the ripening paddy, searching for frogs and locusts. A large paddy field full of shallow standing water attracted a large group of Wood Sandpipers that would periodically take off and sweep along the fields before alighting again and disappearing into the paddy stalks. Cormorants sunned themselves after an early morning dip. Purple Moorhens and Pheasant-tailed Jacanas were in evidence everywhere. This part of the road is a favourite habitat for these two species.

Black-headed Munia

Black-headed Munias were twittering in the long grasses bordering the irrigation ditches running beside the road. Our auto driver was fascinated by this variety. He didn't know that such creatures existed, almost under his nose as it were! Prasad generously gave up his spare binoculars to the driver and that worthy now clung to them like a drowning man clutching at straws. Meantime, we walked a few meters to where there was a large fresh-water lake, which supplies the surrounding fields with their irrigation water and also acts as a buffer, preventing the salt waters of the lagoon from entering the water table. This lake usually has lots of ducks on it, but now there was little here, save for some Coots, Purple Moorhens, a few Shovellers and a large flock of some white birds that seemed interesting. Binoculars and telescope now came into play and the birds were identified as a large flock of Pallas' Gulls. These were interesting birds and so we spent a considerable amount of time here, watching the antics of the flock. In this way, we were enabled to see some more species such as the Little Terns, a few Garganey, several Lesser Whistling Teal and a few more munias and jacanas.



Pallas' Gull

From this point on, the salt pans and mud-flats of the lagoon began. Small waders inhabited these parts; diminutive Little Stints and Ringed Plovers. While watching these plovers running around, I noticed one that seemed to be different. I concentrated my attention on this one and discovered, to my delight, that the lake had provided me with yet another lifer: A Common Ringed Plover. The bird, notwithstanding its name, is anything but common. It is a most Uncommon bird and to see two of them scuttling about was absolutely delightful. I gazed at them as a philatelist might stare at a Penny Black… Saint Patrick was obviously on the job! With a start like this, I hoped that the day would continue in similar vein. So, we got back into the auto and continued along the way.

We started to see a scattering of other birds now. Stately Flamingos in small flocks close to the road. Much larger flocks were to be seen in the background, deeper in the bowels of the lagoon. A scattering of ducks started to appear, dotted around the surface. And then suddenly, the slight mist lifted and we saw, with many gasps of surprise, that the surface of the lake is literally a carpet of ducks. They were all over the place, spread as thickly as butter over bread. I was stunned at the numbers; this lake has always been good at providing numbers but never had I seen so many ducks in one place. At a very conservative estimate, we put the numbers at over a 100,000 birds.

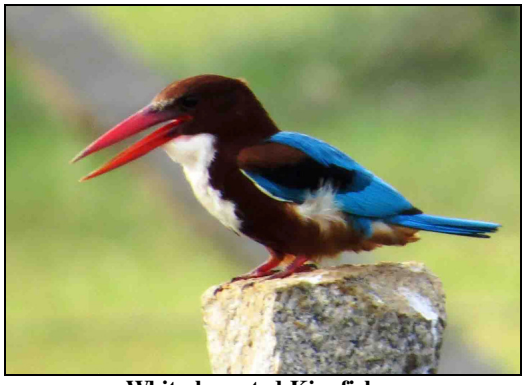
Northern Pintail

The bulk of the raft consisted of the handsome Pintails, but there was a smattering of Shovellers, Gadwalls and Spotbills to add variety. Mixed up with all these were the larger waders: Wood Sandpipers, Blacktailed Godwits, a few Ruff and several Blackwinged Stilts. Painted Storks in very large numbers and many Egrets and Herons. Terns were few in number, but there were some floating around. Pelicans, most of them from the Nelapattu heronry, were fishing in the deeper waters, near the flamingos. Best of all, a large gaggle of Barheaded Geese were also taking their ease in the shallows. This was certainly the mother lode. No wonder there were so few ducks in any of the other lakes and ponds around the area. It seemed that the entire population had gathered on this lagoon.

Our auto driver was completely overwhelmed! Clutching his binoculars, he moved from one sight to the next. By now his birding eyes were starting to open. He pointed out a couple of other interesting sights such as a Shikra skulking in a nearby shrubbery. He was also the first to apprise us of the fact that the flocks of Flamingos were scattered near and far and that there were a lot more than we suspected. Spread out thinly rather than their usual habit of flocking together, we realised there could be as many as ten to twelve thousand of these birds scattered over the lake. For sheer numbers, we seemed to have come to the right spot.

The entire drive continued in similar vein. We saw large and small rafts of duck scattered all over, a couple more pods of Flamingo and many waders. But now we were starting to worry. Where were the gulls and terns? There should have been hundreds of the latter and several dozen of the former, at least. We realised something that had been niggling me for a long time. The lake was dry. There was no water here. Large areas that, the previous year, were under a foot or so of water were now dry. The cracked earth revealed that there had been little moisture here for many moons. Where had the water gone?

Local enquiries revealed that the locals blamed this on the lack of rains for many months. I was surprised to hear this; I was under the impression that, what with the unseasonal storms that have been battering the coast, there would have been a surfeit of water in this lake. Instead of which, I was seeing several indications that there was NO water here. The tribe of fisher folk that used to live here, and whom we sometimes asked to take us out into the lake in one of their boats so as to get close to the flamingos, were nowhere to be seen. Where the fishing boats used to be anchored, there was now a bone-dry stretch of caked mud. It was clear that the fishermen had moved to more conducive areas, perhaps close to the sea mouth where the water would be deep enough to allow them to at least cast their nets, even if not to make a very large catch. This was something very worrying. It is unnatural for this huge lagoon to be so dry. Something is going wrong. I am definitely going to raise the issue with the authorities and try to figure out what is happening. Maybe the storms have altered the sandbars allowing the sea to come into the lagoon, or the rivers have been stoppered up or have got obstructed. It struck me then that this could very well be the reason why we were seeing so many birds. Perhaps because they no longer had large stretches of water to choose from, they were all gathering wherever there was sufficient water to provide them with their wants.

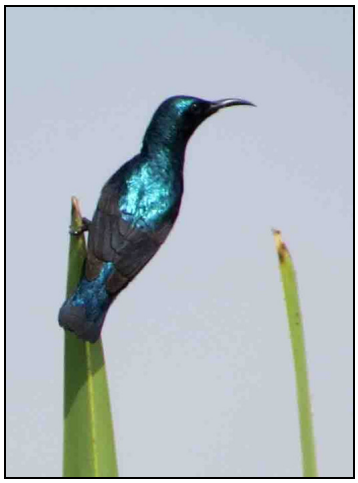


White-breasted Kingfisher

The auto driver, of course, knew nothing of our musings and concerns. All that he knew was that he had learned something new today. And he was now fully into the thick of things. He and Prasad were discussing various aspects of birding and he showed himself to be a quick and very eager learner. Prasad was delighted with his latest student and spared no effort to ensure that the driver was not only having a good time watching the birds, but was also learning how to identify and classify them. In this vein we ended our day, glad of two important things that we had achieved today. One was the discovery of some of the largest flocks of ducks seen anywhere in the recent past.

The other, of course, was the creation of a new birder!

DAY FOUR - PULICAT



Purple Sunbird

In earlier years, I had always nursed a keen desire to visit the Vedurupattu Village Heronry. This place was once famed for the number of nesting Painted Storks that built their ponderous edifices in the huge tamarind trees in the heart of the little village and there, safe from harm, raised their hungry brood. However, questioning the local forestry officers, we were informed that the Storks had now changed their nesting site. Where do they nest now, we asked? The answer: inside the SHAR complex. Well, that was that; there was no way we were going to get inside to check out the heronry here. So, what were we to do on the last day…

Our friendly new birder (the auto-wallah) volunteered the information that he knew some places where there were usually lots of birds. He insisted this place was not very far off and was equally insistent that he would take us there. Having found his enthusiasm to be both infectious and refreshing, we took him up on his offer and so, early morning of the fourth day saw us once more bumping along in the auto towards these "new" birding spots. We had been joined during the night by Ganesh, a Chennai-based birder and photographer who also accompanied us.

The auto-wallah took us first to a small fresh-water lake some distance away from the town. All around this lake were spreading paddy-fields and people were busy toiling away. It was a peaceful and relaxing scene, if slightly chilly. The weather had changed during the night; there was a hint of rain in the air and the surrounding areas wore a cloak of mist. So we were busy packing our binoculars and cameras into stout plastic bags. I pulled out a very serviceable plastic bag and carefully wrapped my binoculars up in them. Just as I was congratulating myself on having beaten the rain, I happened to glance at the binocular cover and noticed, for the first time, that it proudly bore the legend "*waterproof*"! Death, where is thy sting!!! Prasad, Anand and Ganesh were convulsed with mirth, holding their sides and shaking with laughter; I fear it is going to take me a long time to live this down.

Suddenly all laughter died down. We had achieved the top of the bund of this little lake and there, right in front of us was a little group of Pochards. I first thought they were White-eyed Pochards (also known as Ferruginous Ducks) but a closer look showed them to be Tufted Ducks. This was interesting enough. The plastic bags were frantically torn open and binoculars (both waterproof and otherwise) and cameras emerged and went into rapid action. We swept the waters and realised there were lots of Pochards here. The lake was fairly large and gave an impression of considerable depth. A small bund built into the lake divided it into two; the smaller part was more reed covered and shallow. Here too, there were plenty of Pochards plus many Garganeys, a few Cotton Teal and a sprinkling of Coots and Grebes.

Tufted Duck Male

Tufted Duck Female

A solitary Yellow Bittern put in an appearance and allowed us a good view of it, as it crouched in the tall grass and pretended to be a reed-stalk.

Yellow Bittern

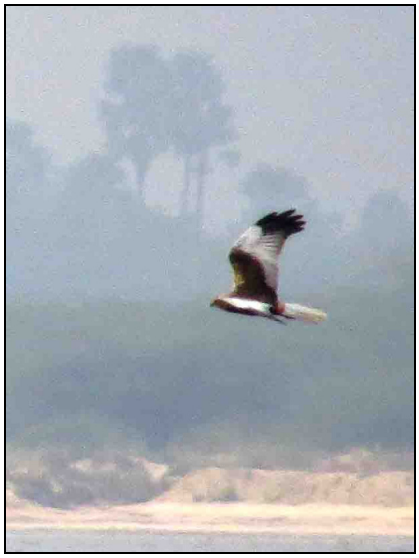
Highly colourful grasshoppers or locusts of some species were indulging in a sort of procreation orgy among the bushes that lined this bund. Pipits and Larks trotted around and some Lesser Whistling Teal were also descried.

Rufous-tailed Lark

This was certainly a place that deserved a form of its own in the Waterfowl Survey activities and I made up my mind that it shall be so. With this in mind, we instituted enquiries with the vociferous locals on names and other important socio-economic features of the place. The little boys who appeared as if by magic to see what these strange *saars* were up to, were most informative and gave us a wealth of information, most of it contradictory! One needs to be patient when dealing with such… They have all the information, it just has to be assiduously mined for! Having gathered the required information, the auto-wallah exhorted us that we proceed to the place he had in mind. It seemed that this lake, though doubtless an interesting spot was not the place he had told us about.

Common Snipe

So, back into the auto and more back-breaking potholes, necessitating slow progress… one advantage of which was that it allowed us to see some interesting species along the roadside, such as a couple of Common Snipe, a few Marsh Harriers and a Black-shouldered Kite, and we finally reached the place mentioned by the auto-wallah.



Eurasian Marsh Harrier

On the left side of the SHAR road, there are some small islands to be seen some considerable distance away. From what I could make out, the place we were at now seemed to be the other side of these islands - effectively the backwaters of the lagoon.

I was convinced that, if there is a heaven on earth, it was right here! We had not even reached the place yet when we saw a dog-like creature stalking along the shores of the lagoon and apparently stalking some of the many thousand waders that were discernible. It seemed to be a village dog, until we got it in the binoculars. As soon as it was clearly visible, it metamorphosed into a Jackal… what on earth was it doing here! Catching wildfowl, by the looks of things. We saw it wading about in the water and heading with great determination towards a small flock of Pelicans and Painted Storks. The birds watched its approach with a sardonic air and, just as the poor creature was within striking range, they leisurely spread their wings and took off, leaving the unfortunate Jackal staring frustratedly after them. Obviously disappointed with this unfriendly attitude on the part of the birds, the Jackal now waded off towards one of the small islands that dotted the surface on this side and disappeared.

Jackal

We swept the waters; a few Flamingos were seen, maybe about two to three thousand of them. And then we saw the ducks: wave upon wave upon wave of them… There were literally tens of thousands of them; in places we could not see the waters, they were so black with ducks. I thought they were lumps of mud initially. I have never seen so many ducks in one single place ever before.

Anand was equally thunderstruck and as for Prasad, he was ecstatic. The auto-wallah, although suitably smug as befits the person who brought us here, was nevertheless equally astonished by the sheer numbers of birds we could see. I am not exaggerating when I say that there were at least two lakh ducks in this one place alone.

I settled down in a suitable place to see what the bulk of the population was. Applying my eyes to the telescope, I slowly panned the rafts, trying to get an estimate of the numbers and also the species.

Gadwall

The bulk was again Pintails, with a very few Widgeons, a couple of Gadwalls and Shovellers and some suspicious-looking larger birds some distance away. Turning my eyes from the birds to my notebook, I suddenly saw these large birds take off and come towards me. Dropping my notebook and snatching up the binoculars, I easily identified these birds as Common Shelduck. There were twenty-one of these magnificent birds that came flying in towards where I sat on a small masonry wall on the edge of the water. They landed in the water some distance away and stared around.

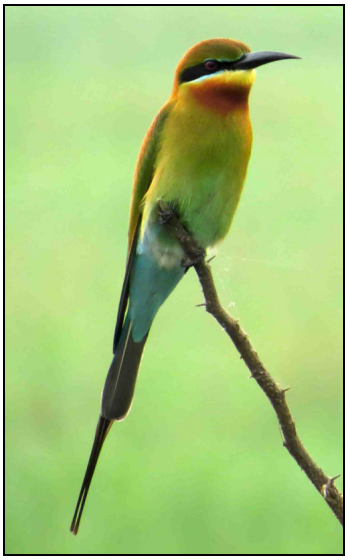
I, meantime, was trying to retain my balance on the small parapet, keep a keen eye on the birds and frantically reach for the camera in the depths of my bag – all at the same time. I just managed to save my bag from dropping into the water, and only by clutching at thin air and waving my arms around like a windmill did I manage to prevent myself from tumbling backwards into the depths of the lagoon. What with all this activity, when I finally looked towards the Shelduck they were long gone, winging out over the lagoon and disappearing into the distance: Now I knew how that Jackal felt!

The day was now quite hot. Gone was the hint of rain that was threatening in the morning. We walked along a small road, observing many small birds in the fields and with the huge rafts of ducks always beckoning to us. A Greater Spotted Eagle gave us a glimpse of one of the very few raptors we saw on this trip.

Close by was the dried-up bed of the lake, which gave us a chance to get close to the ducks and flamingos, so we started to get down towards them. Ganesh stepped out onto a firm-looking mudbank and found himself buried in mud up to his shins. Heaving himself out, he found himself without one shoe: the mud had retained this offering! Fishing out the truant, now coated with black and evil-smelling mud, he muttered under his breath and started off towards a convenient patch of water to give it (the shoe) and his legs a thorough washing. Busy watching this interesting phenomenon, I forgot to look where I was going and walked into a bog myself! For all that the greater expanse of this flat lake-bed is composed of soft sand, there are some bogs hidden with great skill in these wastes and it behooved us to watch where we were going.

However, these two were the only untoward incidents and, having washed off the mud and muck from our shoes and trousers, we lowered ourselves on the soft sand and unwrapped our lunch. What a capital place for a picnic: soft sand below us, honking flamingos and quacking ducks all around us and the sun pleasantly warm on the shoulders! A little bit of heaven on earth was right here.

And so, full and replete, we lounged around and tried counting the flamingos, the waders and the ducks. Once we had a reasonable estimate, we looked at our watches and realised it was time to get back if we were to make our train later in the evening. So, having gazed long and hard one last time at the birds, we returned to our lodge and, having warmed the auto-wallah's heart by assuring him that we would be recommending him to any other birders who may want to follow in our footsteps, we met our train and so back to civilisation! I don't know about the others, but I thought for the next couple of weeks my dreams at least would be filled with ducks, flamingos, geese and waders dancing all around me! And maybe I would finally be able to see the Jackal get himself a decent meal!



Blue-tailed Bee-eater

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Report – Indoor Meeting – 16th December 2013

On 16th December 2013, we were treated to a very interesting talk on the Asian Waterfowl Census (AWC) and its use as a tool for conservation and protection of waterbird habitats and populations. Humayun Taher, the speaker, is a veteran member of the BSAP and an old hand at birding in general and the AWC in particular. During the talk, Humayun shared a lot of eye-opening information on the importance of conservation of habitats. Starting with an introduction on census techniques, he explained how data gathered during such exercises can help in better understanding the current state of bird populations, the threats faced by them during migration, and changes in weather patterns and migration routes. Such data would also help in improving wildlife ecology management practices.

Humayun explained that the AWC, involving several international organizations like Wetlands International (WI), Asian Wetlands Bureau (AWB), Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) and Bombay Natural History Society (BNHS), was a very serious exercise having direct ramifications on international ecology management and conservation practices. BSAP members, therefore, can also contribute by actively participating in such efforts.

Humayun then moved on to discuss different types of wetlands in Andhra Pradesh, like shoreline, rivers, lakes, lagoons, mangroves, swamps, etc, and the major wetlands like Pulicat / Nelapattu, Kolleru, Manjira / Singur, Pocharam, Uppalapadu, etc. He also shared recommended action steps for better protection and conservation of habitats, and emphasised that BSAP members can play an active role by reporting and drawing the attention of concerned officials to any instances of encroachment, habitat damage etc observed by them.

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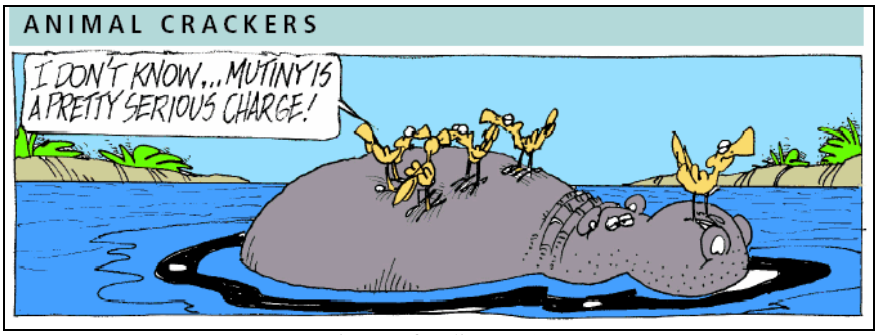
Bird Humour



(From Times of India, 17-09-2012)

Bird of the Month

Text and photos: Umesh Mani

Greater Painted-snipe (*Rostratula benghalensis*)

Greater Painted-snipe Male (L) and Female (R)
(en route Narsapur, 19-09-2010)

Order: Charadriiformes
Family: Rostratulidae
Genus: *Rostratula*
Species: *R. benghalensis*
Size: 23-28 cm

Description &distribution: The Greater Painted-snipe is a plump, medium-sized wader of the Rostratulidae family, which is usually found near reed-beds close to the edges of ponds, lakes, streams, marshes and swamps. It has dark bronze-green upperparts with fine black barring, a distinctive pinkish or white eye-patch, a long reddish-brown bill slightly down-curved at the tip, rounded buff-spotted wings, a short tail and long, partially-webbed feet. The white colour of the breast extends upwards around the top of the folded wings. It is one of the few species showing reverse sexual dimorphism – the female is larger and more brightly coloured than the male. The female shows a black breast-band and a rich chestnut-brown on the head, neck and throat, while the male is paler and greyer in colour. Immature birds resemble the males but for the breast-band, while the chicks are buff-coloured with black stripes running down their backs.

The Greater Painted-snipe is distributed across Africa, Pakistan, India and south-east Asia.

Behaviour: Usually seen single or in pairs, and rarely in groups of up to 12, the Greater Painted-snipe is a very shy species and tends to skulk near waterside vegetation so that it can easily take cover when it perceives a threat. When flushed it has a rail-like flight, with legs dangling, and shows bobbing hind-parts when landing and, sometimes, while walking. It uses its long bill to forage in the mud for its food, which includes insects, crustaceans, molluscs and earthworms. It may also eat seeds. It is a relatively quiet species, with the male occasionally uttering a trilling call, and the female uttering a guttural *ook* sound and sometimes, hissing noises. One sample can be heard here.

Nesting: The breeding season is between April and July. The nest is usually a shallow scrape in soft ground among the grass or reeds near water-bodies, and lined with plant material like stems or leaves; it may also be made of grass, weeds or other vegetation. The female initiates courtship and is polyandrous, whereas the male incubates and raises the young. The clutch consists of 2-5 cream or beige eggs with grey splotches.

Local name: The Greater Painted-snipe is known as *'rajchaha'* in Hindi, *'mayil ullan'* in Tamil and *'chitrit kunal'* in Sanskrit.

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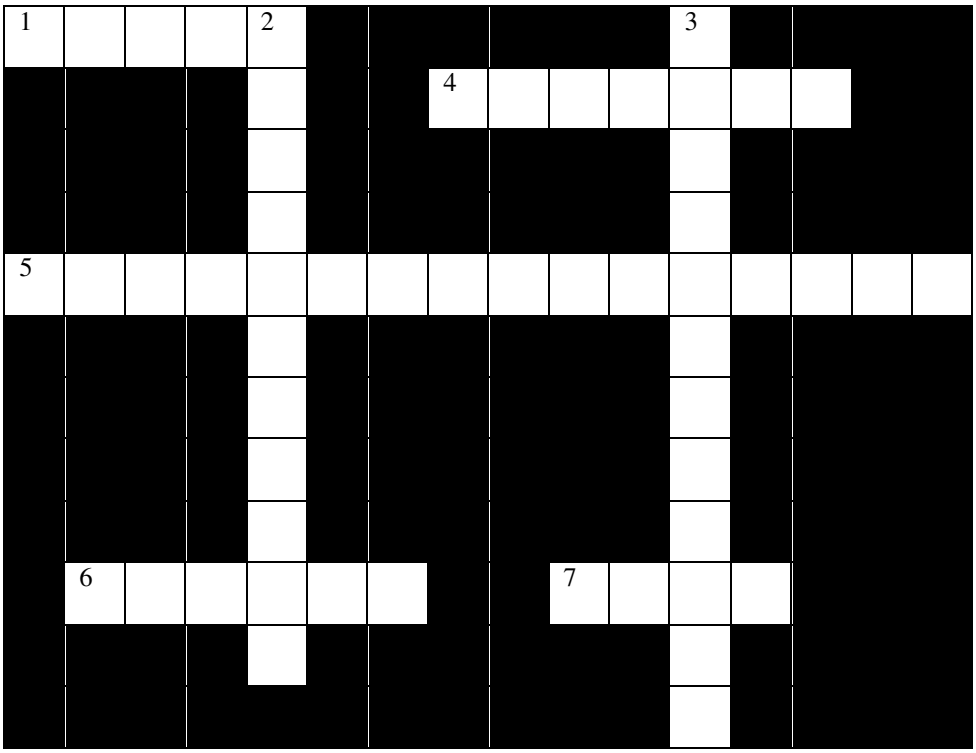
BIRDING CROSSWORD #24

Umesh Mani

The answers to the clues given below are bird names or other birding-related terms. Let's see how many you can find!
(*Solutions in next month's Pitta*)



ACROSS

1 - Would the falcon bend low to dive? (5)

4 - This bird is happy the law is upheld (7)

5 - Migrants arrange Indian Rupees for panther and lion (8,8)

6 - Do these birds manufacture towels? (6)

7 - Headless criminal! (4)

DOWN

2 - Ha! Pied Piper brings Rolls-Royce without post-production for this hunter (4,7)

3 - Father, by dint of stroke, finds this bird (7,5)

Solutions to Crossword #23 (Pitta, December 2013)
ACROSS: 1 – MESIA, 5 - LAMMERGEIER, 6 – TERNS
DOWN: 2- SPIDERHUNTER, 3 – NILTAVA, 4 – THRUSH

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